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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy has received great acclaim as a poet and novelist, but his short stories have remained largely ignored with regard to the usual short story "canon." Early reviews of Hardy's stories were mixed, but after his death the tide of critical opinion tended to turn against Hardy's stories. A significant historical factor was the prevalence of censorship by editors during the Victorian period, since Hardy focused on telling life stories "honestly." Hardy was forced by editors to alter his writing to conform to social standards of morality. Clearly, the effects of these circumstances are part of the history of these stories, thus affecting a full appreciation of them. Consideration of the reception history also sheds light on Hardy's innovative techniques, including his use of black comedy or the absurd. Critical opinion has also been affected by Hardy's theory of the storyteller's art, including his fascination with the "exceptional" or the bizarre. Hardy's explorations of the supernatural is an aspect of his stories that is most misunderstood by today's critics, who admire Modernist story tellers like Chekhov, Joyce and Hemingway. Today, with the advent of cultural criticism and the interest in folk materials, Hardy's stories may take on new resonance and generate growing interest among critics. Further re-evaluation of Hardy's stories by Hardy scholars is certainly called for in such a climate, perhaps even reinstating him as a master of the short story form. (Seventeen references are attached.) (HB)

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Critical Reception of Thomas Hardy's Short Stories:
Finding "the Key to the Art"

Thomas Hardy has received world-wide acclaim for his novels and poetry, but his numerous short stories have been largely ignored and have never been part of the usual short story "canon." The entire collection of forty-seven stories spans some twenty-five years--the earliest published in 1874 and the latest in 1899. Most of Hardy's stories were first published in some of the most astutely edited and popular English and American periodicals; later they were collected and published in four volumes: Wessex Tales (1888); A Group of Noble Dames (1891); Life's Little Ironies (1894); A Changed Man (1913).

The earliest notices of Hardy's stories were somewhat mixed in their critical appraisal. Still, critics such as Joseph Reilly felt they bore "the indubitable marks of Hardy's genius, his constructive skill, his vitality, his power of characterization, his vigor, his vividness . . . " (407). Reilly, in 1928, maintained that "if were it not for the fame of his longer masterpieces, he would have been accounted one of the greatest of modern short story writers" (407). Likewise, Samuel Chew singled out several of the stories for praise calling them "little masterpieces" revealing "grace, delicacy, humor, felicity of setting, and knowledge of the folk background" (55).

However, shortly after Hardy's death the tide of critical opinion turned against the stories; the favorable early reviews did little to impress later critics who were quite negative in

their estimation of the enduring qualities of the stories. By 1942 Edmund Blunden was writing, "I cannot see the world which has been trained by other masters in that field in a form developing in another tone and pace from Hardy's going back to them with great joy and thanksgiving" (201). As Evelyn Hardy summed it up, "These short-stories bear little resemblance to those of the great masters of this art as we now know it, whether French, Russian, English or American" (183). Ten years later, Irving Howe arrived at the conclusion that "to write a history of modern fiction or modern poetry without seriously considering Hardy would be unthinkable; to omit his name from a study of the modern short story would be plausible" (259). Hardy critics such as Samuel Hynes, Richard Carpenter, and John Wain all generally concurred with this judgement, although sometimes pointing out "minor" virtues or some exceptions to the general consensus on the stories. Just a few editions of "selected" stories by Hardy have been published since his death, and "The Three Strangers" is the only story reprinted occasionally in anthologies.

Samuel Hynes, in his introduction to Great Short Works of Thomas Hardy (1967), offers Hardy's lack of understanding of the form of the short story itself as an explanation for their critical rejection: "He seemed to have no conception of the story as a distinct form of fiction, beyond the notion that a tale should be unusual, and the people interesting. . . " (xxiii). However, I believe that the causes for the changes in critical opinion during the years after Hardy's death are complex and convoluted, involving not only Hardy's conception of the short

story form, but also social/historical factors underlying Hardy's production of the stories, the advent of "new criticism," and attitudes in the first half of the twentieth century toward the "popular culture" aspects of Hardy's work. Careful consideration of these causes illuminates a need for re-evaluation of these stories from the perspective which Vincent B. Leitch calls "the protocol of entanglement" (74). My comments here will serve to point the direction which contemporary Hardy scholars need to go by briefly examining these causes as a necessary prelude to critical re-evaluation of his contribution to the short story form.

One significant social/historical factor which needs further study is the prevalence of censorship by periodical editors during the Victorian era. An important tenet of Thomas Hardy's personal philosophy about the story-teller's function and art was that the writer's duty was to portray life "honestly." For Hardy this usually meant focusing on the myriad of difficulties he saw in the relationships between the sexes. This accounts for his "realistic" depiction of his characters' sexual natures and his frank revelation of the hypocrisy behind much of the traditional Victorian insistence on "high moral standards" in its reading material. Many of the same themes which Victorian editors, critics, and general readers objected to in the novels also are explored in his short stories although in abbreviated, muted form. By the 1890's Hardy was experiencing attacks on many fronts due to the perceived "unsuitability" of his subjects. He was often forced to submit to demands from his publishers to modify his work

to satisfy public taste. Hardy's unsuccessful struggle to maintain the integrity of his novels (especially Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure) during their serial publication is well known and often cited as his reason for giving up fiction writing. Not as well known is the similar pressure exerted on him to alter his short stories to avoid anything "dangerous" for a family audience.

A specific example of this pressure, which is undoubtedly representative, relates to the publication of A Group of Noble Dames in 1891. Florence Emily Hardy's biography, The Life of Thomas Hardy: 1840-1928, which is generally understood to be mostly Hardy's own work, documents his reaction to a visit with the editor of the periodical Graphic, Arthur Locker. Hardy writes, "He says he does not object to the stories [A Group of Noble Dames] but the directors do. Here's a pretty job! Must smooth down these Directors somehow I suppose" (225). Timothy O'Sullivan's biography of Hardy adds to this story by quoting Locker's letter to Hardy: "'Now,' wrote Arthur Locker, 'what do you propose to do? Will you write an entirely fresh story, or will you take the Noble Dames and alter them to suit our taste?'" (128). O'Sullivan also provides an insight into Hardy's mood when forced to make revisions on the stories: "Hardy set about the necessary bowdlerisation indifferently but with a bad grace, marking the manuscript with waspish remarks, such as 'solely on account of the tyranny of Mrs. Grundy' against one of the excisions from 'Squire Petrick's Lady'" (128).

Other evidence of Hardy's attitude about required alterations

to his stories can be found in the note added in 1912 to "The Distracted Preacher" when it was included in the new edition of his collected works.

> Note - The ending of this story with the marriage of Lizzy and the minister was almost de riqueur in an English magazine at the time of writing. But at this date, thirty years after, it may not be amiss to give the ending that would have been preferred by the writer to the convention used above. (Wessex 242)

Hardy goes on to assert that, in fact, Lizzy did not marry the minister, but "much to her credit in the author's opinion" emigrated with the smuggler Jim (243). This more controversial ending (supposedly corresponding more closely to the "true incidents") reflects Hardy's continuing dissatisfaction with the necessity of pleasing conservative audience tastes.

In the case of the major novels, on which his reputation mainly rested, Hardy went back and painstakingly restored them to reflect his original intentions when they were published in one volume (rather than serial) form. Unfortunately, this process was apparently not followed (or at least it is not well documented) with all of the stories when they were assembled for collected editions. Nevertheless, clear evidence exists that Hardy felt the same constraints on him in trying to publish his stories in the various periodicals as he did when submitting his novels for serialization.

In fact, Hardy may have been even more restricted in the subject matter and treatment of his favorite themes in the

stories. Serial production of the novels offered one advantage for Hardy--the ending was suppressed long enough to create an interested and receptive audience which could anticipate a conventional "happy" resolution to any situation which caused them unease during a particular episode. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund in "Linear Stories and Circular Visions: The Decline of the Victorian Serial" discuss the ramifications of this mode of production as it relates specifically to Hardy's The Woodlanders. The beginning and the middle of an installment text would

> establish its fundamental success and sales, delaying and perhaps reducing any disappointment the ending might later create. The single-volume issue, of course, made the novel's ending immediately available, and no action could be taken to counter unfavorable reviews of the whole. Thus, Hardy composed much of The Woodlanders's serial version to avoid offending his editor or his public; but the ending of the novel, and the shape it retroactively imposed on the whole after April 1887, inspired an adverse reaction from Victorian readers (171).

According to Robert Gittings, Hardy's stated desire was to "demolish the 'doll' of English fiction, which demanded a happy ending" (qtd. in Hughes and Lund 171). This could partially be accomplished through serial installments, but not easily in the short story form where endings could not be concealed. In light of this, it is surprising that so many of the stories are characteristic of Hardy's darker vision of life and avoid cliché resolutions.

Clearly, the effects of the circumstances of production of the stories, that is, acceptance by the publishers and audience in the Victorian era, are part of the "history" of these stories and cast a shadow over our full understanding of Hardy's revelation of human nature and behavior in them. Yet practitioners of "new criticism" earlier in this century generally excluded consideration of this historical context; only recently has there been a revival of scholarly interest through movements such as "new historicism" and audience-reception studies. Even a superficial look at the recurrent themes of the stories such as "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," "The Son's Veto," or "On the Western Circuit" reveals that Hardy's ironic vision of life is here crystalized by the econony of presentation. Perhaps the only difference lies in the absence of compelling figures, such as Henchard, Jude, Sue, Eustacia, Tess, who rebel against their fate before going down to defeat. Consideration of the short story form itself and the impact of censorship might alter our perception of many of Hardy's stories.

Reconstruction of the reception history of the stories also sheds new light on Hardy's innovative techniques in some of the stories. One of the risks Hardy took of alienating his contemporaries was his use of "black comedy" or even what is now called "the absurd." For example, references such as Ian Gregor's to Hardy's attempts at "comedie noire" (94) in his novels also apply to some of Hardy's most successful stories, such as "Squire Petrick's Lady." In this fascinating study of twisted logic, Petrick, mistakenly believing his wife has committed adultery with

a man of higher social rank, manages to turn a vice into a virtue at his own expense. He comes to admire his wife's "lofty taste" (in her selection of a lover) and revels in the thought that the man who made him a cuckold gave him a son of "blue stock." When he learns that his son <u>is</u> undoubtedly his after all, the doctor who reveals his wife's propensities toward delusion questions his depressed look at the news. Squire Petrick's answer is that he feels, "'A bit unmanned.'" (<u>Group</u> 161). The comic element so obvious in this reply darkens when the Squire then turns his disappointment into anger and resentment against his young son for not looking and acting like the Marquis of Christminister. Albert Guerard believes that Hardy was far ahead of his time in his "symbolic use of absurdity" in this tale, stating that "he brilliantly reduces class consciousness to the absurd of symbolism and fantasy" (26). 'But in spite of Guerard's great admiration for this story, it has been almost totally ignored by other Hardy scholars. Earlier judgements that Hardy did not anticipate techniques of the so-called "masters" of the form continue to prevail and prevent any serious reconsideration of the merit of the stories.

Another significant factor affecting popular/critical opinions about the stories relates to a very different tenet of Hardy's theory of the storytellers' art. This tenet or belief led Hardy away--in several of his stories--from the "realistic" depiction of human desires and frailties which caused problems with his publishers and conservative Victorian audience. But, ironically, it is this less controversial, more traditional type

of story which has alienated many modern critics and led them to generalize about Hardy's "minor fiction" as mere "potboilers." In his diary in 1893 Hardy presents his conception of what makes a story worth telling:

> A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We taletellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman. The whole secret of fiction and the drama--in the constructional part--lies in the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal. The writer who knows exactly how exceptional, and how non-exceptional, his events should be made possesses the key to the art. (Hardy, Florence 252)

In the daily journal notes or observations which make up much of Florence Emily Hardy's biography, Hardy frequently recorded anecdotes which dealt with superstitions, folk magic and witchcraft, and the bizarre. "Instances of the unusual in any form were the staple of local journalism and gossip, and Hardy noted with care instances that appealed to him" (O'Sullivan 98). Ruth Firor states in Folkways in Thomas Hardy that "No incident was too trifling, no belief too obscure to record" (82), and certainly the large number of entries in his journals reveals how deeply this type of data fascinated him.

Hardy used this unusual material occasionally in minor ways in his novels, but in some of his stories the "exceptional"

elements are central to the action. For example, in "The Withered Arm" he recounts a physical affliction apparently caused by "witchly" powers and uses the practices of a conjurer as a key plot device. Although the tale begins realistically, almost prosaically, the two main characters, Rhoda Brook and Gertrude Lodge, both come to believe in Rhoda's unnatural ability to cause harm through her dreams. In the powerful tale "The Fiddler of the Reels" the demonic Wat (Mop) Ollamor seems to exercise preternatural powers of fascination through his seductive music. Mop is the archetypal stranger who came from "nobody knew where" and who disappeared into the "Dantesque gloom" of the woods at the conclusion of the story. Likewise, the mysterious Baron in "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" has "something about him magic and unearthly" suggesting the demon lover of legend and ballad. In another story, "Barbara of the House of Grebe," Hardy presents grotesque, macabre scenes involving a statue mutilated to resemble a horribly burned man; the psychology of horror seems to have more affinity with Stephen King's stories than the nineteenth century realistic tradition. Other Hardy short stories incorporate logic defying circumstances which center on local superstitions, for example, "The Superstitious Man's Story."

It is Hardy's explorations of the supernatural or preternatural world of the "exceptional," obviously enjoyed by readers in Hardy's day, that are most often misunderstood by later critics. A few modern readers and critics accepted, with reservations, Hardy's predilection for hinting at the supernatural and occult. Donald Davidson in "The Traditional Basis of Thomas

Hardy's Fiction" was one of the first to try to explain Hardy's interest in the "exceptional" as part of a on-going tradition. He saw a Hardy story as "an extension, in the form of modern prose fiction, of a traditional ballad or an oral tale. . . " (15). According to Davidson this accounts for the frequent inclusion of the "improbable and unpredictable." Douglas Brown agreed saying, "Hardy's imagination was nurtured in a tradition of balladry. . ." (110), and John Wain points out that "seen in this light, the improbabilities which are so numerous in Hardy's stories are not merely defensible, but an essential feature of the genre" (xi).

These critics were, however, the exception rather than the rule and were operating more as "apologists" for Hardy's stories than anything else. When Chekhov, Maupassant, Joyce and Hemingway became the accepted "masters" of the modern short story, Hardy's ventures into the realm of the occult, supernatural and "Gothic" horror were no longer seen as exciting, but only rather ludicrous. Likewise, literary critics following "new critical" dictates deplored the lack of tightness, precision, and economy in this type of story. Since the stories often encompass an unusually long time span, covering much of the life-time of his characters, they lack the compressed unity that mark the "modern" form. Not long after Hardy's death, this type of story became unfashionable even among the general reading public. More sophisticated, urban audiences turned away from an interest in folktales, peasant superstitions, and odd rural traditions recounted at a leisurely pace. Thus, both the subject and the form of these tales of the strange and unusual were rejected.

Hardy's artistic philosophy of exploring both the exceptional and the non-exceptional domains thus created the situation that he was out-of-step with the times one way or the other. His own contemporaries enjoyed strikingly unusual tales, but shied away from too much blunt realism in the depiction of the ordinary relationships of men and women. Later, this trend reversed itself as the audience changed; the tales of the unusual, the "exceptional" lost favor. Realism was preferred, but readers felt Hardy's stories in this vein did not go far enough in matching the great modern short story writers.

Now, however, perhaps we have come full circle. Once again, with the advent of cultural criticism, the kinds of folk material Hardy collected in his journals are considered valuable aesthetic products. Literary works such as Hardy's tales of the supernatural, which represent a popular form of the genre, can be examined as aspects of "popular culture." However, more importantly, we can now recognize the need to probe the historical context out of which Hardy's stories grew, including the impact of editorial censorship and audience reception. Perhaps some of Hardy's stories were irreparably marred by the circumstances of their production. And it may also be that some were written "to pay the butcher" (Hynes xxiii). The whole four volume collection of stories can not be called an unqualified success, but this fact should not surprise us. All of Hardy's writing is marked by unevenness in quality. My argument here is that further re-evaluation of individual stories is certainly called for before deciding whether the best of Hardy's stories can become part of

the short story canon in the 1990's. In the final analysis, perhaps Hardy's "adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal" will prove to be "the key to the art," and Hardy's name will be added to the list of masters of the short story.

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